

Girls Out of

Su Friedrich remembers being 12 years old and gay

Interview by Lydia Marcus



Set in the present day and the mid-1960s, Su Friedrich's latest film, Hide and Seek, melds documentary footage and fictional narrative. In the documentary sections, shot in color, adult lesbians share memories of their emerging sexuality in their pre-teen years. Those stories are intercut with a black and white narrative about 12 year-old girls, which is based in part on Friedrich's own experience. Hide and Seek and other films by Su Friedrich will be shown in April at San Francisco Cinematheque and the Pacific Film Archive, as well as at American Cinematheque in Los Angeles.

A noted experimental filmmaker, Friedrich has been making films since the late 1970s. Her earlier works include Gently Down the Stream, Damned If You Don't, Sink or Swim and Rules of the Road. Hide and Seek is her longest film to date, at just over an hour. It recently played in the documentary competition at the Sundance Film Festival, where this interview was conducted.

Some of the archival footage that you use in Hide and Seek reminds me of the 1931 German film, Maedchen in Uniform. Was that film an influence on you?

I saw that film probably 20 years ago, when the first women's film festivals were going on, and I totally identified with it, and I've seen it a couple of times since then. It's not as if I thought, "Oh yeah, I want to make an updated *Maedchen in Uniform*," but it clearly is an influence in the general scheme of things.

The footage in *Hide and Seek* is from a film called *Our Fascist School*, an Italian film from the late 30s/early 40s, which shows all the ways in which a school functions perfectly in a fascist regime. (Laughs) "We are walking together and we bathe together." I never saw the whole film, but it was one of the ones that I got from Rick Prelinger. I love that it evokes *Maedchen in Uniform*. I wouldn't have felt right about using clips from *Maedchen in Uniform* because I consider that an artwork and *Our Fascist School* is more of an industrial film.

Who is Rick Prelinger?

For many years he's run Prelinger Archives and he's done a number of compilation films. He's just sold his collection to Archive Films in New York, but he still holds the rights to some of them, and he gave me everything for free. He's very connected to the experimental film and video community, and I guess when a project comes along that he believes in, he just wants to help out. It was hard to find material with girls in it. Rick had a lot of great stuff, but I also went to the Archives of the History of American Psychology in Ohio—that's where I got a couple of the other pieces that I really love.

The footage of the woman in Africa with the lions—what was that documentary called?

It's called *Simba*, and it's by Martin and Osa Johnson. They were really wild characters, the first people to bring a motion picture camera to Africa. I wanted to use *Born Free* as the reference for the character, but they would not give us the rights to it. We begged and pleaded and they treated it like it was *Gone With the Wind*. Actually, I had a hard time finding a copy of it. It's not like it's a film that people are still running out to see.

The footage from Simba represents that whole idea of explorers, and the girls in Hide and Seek are explorers. Especially at age 12, if you are gay it's more difficult seeking out others like yourself. There are some shots when you cut to the African hunters and then back to the girls, creating a kind of parallel.

I wanted the film to work metaphorically, so that you know it is about another kind of exploration.

I can't think of any other film that shows pre-teen girls in this kind of sexual stage. I don't think it's ever been done.

It hasn't.

Even for boys it's barely been touched on.

Right.

Has this film been years in the making? Did you think, "God I wish I could have seen something like this when I was 12"—not that any 12 year-olds are likely to see this film?

Uniform

Right. That's why it says on the video sleeve and the promotional card, "This is a film for every woman who's been to a slumber party and every man who wonders what went on at one." Because I don't want people to think this is a movie for kids. It's not.

But it's not as if I wanted to make this for the last 15 years; I've been really focused on other films. One of the things that got me started thinking about it was the first action that the Lesbian Avengers did in New York in 1991-92. We went to a public grade school in Queens on the first day of school, when all the parents bring their kids, and we had balloons that said, "Teach about lesbian lives." We handed a balloon to each kid as they went into the playground, and the parents were furious. A few parents were cool with it, and the kids were excited—"Wow, I get a balloon!"—but other parents were like, "Let go of that balloon!" Also we had on t-shirts that said, "I was a lesbian child." Seeing that phrase on all these women was so moving to me, I thought, "We have all come from somewhere. There are so many things that went on when I was that age that I haven't thought enough about." So that was a very big part of wanting to do the film.

Were you influenced by Aerlyn Weissman and Lynne Fernie's film Forbidden Love?

There are certain things that I'm familiar with and I like doing, but then I also want to do something different. Definitely *Forbidden Love* was something which interested me when I saw it—that they were trying to combine documentary and fiction—but I had also made a film in 1987, called *Damned If You Don't*, which is fiction intercut with the feature film *Black Narcissus*. That was an interesting film to make in terms of how I had to deal with the audience and this whole question of gay film. I think I was still seen as an experimental filmmaker, and then I made *Damned If You Don't* and suddenly I was a lesbian filmmaker.

Because there's lesbian content in that film—the nun has a crush on this woman. Was it then that people started asking you in interviews, "Are you gay?"

They didn't have to ask me; I think I was always up front about it. If somebody would ask me, "Where did you get the idea for *Damned If You Don't*?" I would say, "Well, I was raised Catholic and I had certain feelings about nuns, and I wanted to explore that."

If you do something that's that explicit, and particularly at that time when there wasn't that much lesbian and gay work around, then you really start to be seen as doing work on this one theme—about being a lesbian. I sort of go back and forth. *Sink or Swim*, which was the next film I made, really had nothing to do with being a lesbian; it was about my relationship with my father. So it's kind of interesting to be seen for a while as making lesbian work, and then doing something that isn't, and then the lesbians are like, "Hey, what about us?" and then the experimental people embrace me again because I'm doing something they can deal with. So I'm in a funny place, I think.

Are you able to just make your films and survive financially?

Since 1990, I've pieced my income together from filmmaking. Before then I did paste-up, I did freelance magazine and book production work. I got a Guggenheim Fellowship for \$22,000 in 1990 when I was finishing *Sink or Swim*, a Rockefeller soon after that, so I thought, "Okay, this is safe for the moment, I'll quit this other work." I figured I'd have to go back to it, but so far so good. I do very small teaching things, an editing class at The New School and an optical printing class. But I don't know what's going to happen now, I don't make that much money and I'm not in line to get grants, because I don't have a new project. So we'll see.

You got NEA money for Hide and Seek. That's incredible.

Isn't it? I thought, if you don't apply you'll feel like a jerk, so just apply, even though the odds are about one half of one percent. Somehow the miracle occurred. Then I also got money from ITVS, and I thought, "Whoa, wait a minute, I got money from the NEA and from public television for this project about lesbians

when they were children. What is going on?" I'm still amazed that it happened.

Do you keep the audience in mind when you are making films—what they are expecting from you or what they want?

I always have cared very much about my audience, in the sense that when I'm making something, I really want to do it so that people will understand it. That's very different than making something so that everyone will like it. Even if I choose to work in a complicated structure, I don't assume that I'm just going to have a tiny audience and they're going to be so knowledgeable that it'll make sense to them. I figure, even if it's very experimental, everyone should be able to experience it in some way. I think there's an attitude among some experimental filmmakers that they're above their audience, and that if what they're doing isn't clear, it's just because the person is too stupid. I don't feel that way. I think people are pretty smart if you give them something that works, that makes sense. I've always tried to make things work in their own context. □

Lydia Marcus is a freelance journalist and reviewer who writes about film, television and music. She is a Los Angeles-based writer whose work has appeared on-line, in print and on the radio.



Scenes from Su Friedrich's *Damned If You Don't* (top), *Sink or Swim* (bottom) and *Hide and Seek* (background).